

### The idea and practicalities of "Nature" in Janusz Korczak's philosophy

Shner, Moshe

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Shner, M. (2018). The idea and practicalities of "Nature" in Janusz Korczak's philosophy. *Society Register*, 2(2), 85-106. <https://doi.org/10.14746/sr.2018.2.2.05>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC Licence (Attribution-NonCommercial). For more information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

*Article*

**MOSHE SHNER\***

Oranim College of Education, Israel

ORCID 0000-0002-5361-7579

## THE IDEA AND PRACTICALITIES OF ‘NATURE’ IN JANUSZ KORCZAK’S PHILOSOPHY

**Abstract:** This article tackles that question of the place of Nature as an idea and Life in Nature as a reality in the educational philosophy of Janusz Korczak. First, we establish the idea that Korczak was a naturalistic philosopher and that nature in its broadest cosmic sense serves as the ordering principle of his entire pedagogical legacy. Influenced by Stoic philosophy, Korczak rejects transcendence and sees the human being in the only context possible, nature. Following this paradigm, we establish Korczak’s education as a reality guided pedagogy. The nature of the child mandates education and not free unrealistic aspirations. The nature of the child, his family, his biography in its broadest sense also set the limits of what can be achieved through education. At last, we follow Korczak’s appreciation of nature and countryside experience as a healing experience for poor, inner-city children. There, in nature, in free play, work, and sport, they regain their physical and mental health. There Korczak also had his best opportunity to learn the child and to develop his known educational ideas, which he later on implemented in his children’s houses.

**Keywords:** Janusz Korczak; nature; inner-city children; countryside; Stoicism.

### Introduction

Janusz Korczak, the Twenty-Century Jewish-Polish educationalist - his understanding of children, his ideas about education, his public struggle for the emancipation of children, and the practicalities of his educational work in the two orphanages under his guidance are well known. They are powerful and inspiring, and yet we remain with the question what is the ordering principle that connects all his beautiful ideas and inspiring educational methodologies into a whole worldview.

\* **Corresponding author:** Oranim Academic College of Education, Department of History, Tivon, Israel 2280300.

E-mail: [mosheshner@gmail.com](mailto:mosheshner@gmail.com)

Most of Korczak's studies remain with the face value presentation of his ideas and fail to offer a whole worldview (Cohen, 1995; Lifton, 1988; Newerly, 1967; Perlis, 1986, and others). Inspiring as Korczak's ideas may be, they fail to bring them together into a coherent philosophy of education. What is the idea that connects, "the respect to the child", "the children's rights", the "I do not know" approach to pedagogy, and the children's democracy, which Korczak implemented in his two children's houses?

The apparently missing paradigm of Korczak's legacy left Korczak in the margins of the field of Philosophy of Education. Korczak is rarely taught in academic Philosophy of Education courses. His legacy is marginal at teacher education programs, overshadowed by figures like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean Piaget, John Dewey, Martin Buber, Alexander Sutherland Neill and Paulo Freire. More frequent, his name is mentioned in the context of Genocide Studies, as a martyr of the Holocaust of the Jewish people. In Israel, for example, the two Korczak's sanctuaries are at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem and The Ghetto Fighters' House Holocaust and Heroism Museum in the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz.

Such a presentation of Korczak's image had a negative effect on Korczak's studies. The admiration replaced the critical study. The tragic last chapter of his life overshadowed his entire pedagogical legacy. His place in the Holocaust discourse and commemoration left him in an academic "no man's land" and diminished his profile as a philosopher of education.

The absence of a Korczak Philosophy of Education is partially also Korczak's blame; his writings are fragmental, more like a flaw of mind. Korczak does not make our task easy as he himself expressed in several times his opposition to elaborate educational theories including of his own. Nonetheless, as we will see, this rejection of all systems is by itself part of a broader system, which directs his thinking.

So, who is Korczak? Is there an educational philosophy that makes sense of all the pieces of his heritage? Can we place him, categorize and contextualize him, and assign him a defined place in the history of educational thought? The hypothesis we explore in this study is that we can recognize the idea of Nature as the missing ordering principle of Korczak educational worldview. According to this hypothesis, Nature is not only a metaphysical cosmic principle. It is also Warsaw's public parks and the countryside, playgrounds, gardening, agricultural work, and sports. Working with poor, inner-city children, Korczak portrayed Nature as the horizons of the miss-

ing reality in the world of his children. Nature is both a cosmic idea of wholeness and a healing green space outside the city.

Korczak intentionally does not provide us with simple and direct guidance to his philosophy. The reader of his outstanding rich body of texts has to bring the pieces together and „connect the dots” to gain a new understanding of his worldview as a naturalist philosopher and educator.

### **The missing ordering principle**

A few of Korczak scholars tried to define a Korczak education theory, and placed him in the context of modern humanistic education and associated him with Dewey and Buber (Silverman 2012; and others). Others wanted to see him as the disciple of the noted Swiss pedagogue Pestalozzi or even traced his philosophy back to the romantic and naturalistic philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Eighteenth-century humanist. These associations are legitimate, but it does not provide us with a whole paradigm that will help us to define a Korczak's Philosophy of Education.

Korczak and Dewey can be side-by-side on the same shelf of Progressive Philosophy of Education, but although we have an evidence that in later years Korczak had a few of Dewey's books in his library, he never mentioned him. We do not know if he was familiar with Dewey's ideas when he had articulated his educational ideas, which he published his *How to Love a Child* in 1919. Dewey's first relevant book, *Democracy, and Education*, was just had been published in 1916, and we have no evidence that Korczak read it before he published his own book, which he actually wrote during World War I.

Buber as well is not present in Korczak's writings; His most important book, *I-Thou*, was published in 1923, four years after the publication of Korczak's "*How to Love a Child*". More important, Korczak and Buber, two humanists, have based their thought on opposing ideas of humanity. As we will see, Korczak was a philosopher of the immanence, while Buber was a philosopher of the transcendence. Korczak in his philosophy of real-life approach to education, which we will discuss later on, was far from the dialogical spirituality of Buber. While Korczak sought for educational guidance in nature and in the actual reality of children, their health, and physical reality, their character, biography and family roots, which altogether determine their life, Buber looked beyond the actual reality of the person into the realm of the free spirit

of the persona. A person was present to the other, in Buber's view, through his words, in their mutual free and open dialogue. I-Though correlations have no nature. It constitutes the freedom of the individual.

It is true that both Korczak and Buber were humanists, who sought the well-being of people in a modern industrial world, but while Korczak was an essentialist, Buber was an existentialist. In their understanding of humanity, and therefore in their education ideas, they were pointing in opposite directions. To associate Korczak with Buber is to miss the very essence of his naturalistic philosophy.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the Swiss philosopher and "founder of modern pedagogy" appears also as a popular explanation of Korczak's pedagogy (Perlis, 1986, 58). Korczak revered in several places in his writings to Pestalozzi (Korczak, 1967, 60, 219, 431, 490) and even went to Swiss (1898) and there had the chance to learn more about his work, yet Pestalozzi's ideas hardly appear in Korczak's texts, and his heritage does not help us to connect the pieces of Korczak's heritage together.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Eighteenth-century humanist, also appears as a likely source of inspiration for Korczak, putting the child at the center (Perlis, 1986, 58-59). Korczak referred to Rousseau and Emile in a positive tone, but it is a common mistake to understand Korczak, like Rousseau, as putting the child in the center. Korczak is advocating the emancipation of the child and respect for his world and rights, but he also emphasizes the child's social context, and as we will see, admits that there are limits even to what education can mend. Korczak lacks any idealization of the child. Not all the children are wonderful, and like among the adults, one can find among children weaknesses and vices. In addition, Korczak advocates the emancipation of the child, based on the idea that the child is a human being here and now, however, childhood, recognized and respected, is not inferior nor superior to any other age in human life as from the perspective of infinity all ages have equal worth.

Where, then, we can get some guidance in our search? A leading Korczak scholar, Yitzhak Perlis, gives us a beginning of a more productive exploration. He points to the fact that in his *Ghetto Diary*, Korczak mentions that Marcus Aurelius' book was a source of consolation in the hardships of the ghetto. Recognizing Marcus Aurelius as a Stoic philosopher, he offers the hypothesis that Korczak was expressing Stoic ideas in his educational leadership in the ghetto (Perlis, in *Ghetto Years*, 88-89). It was probably Stoic "Apathea", which helped Korczak to deal with the coming death of his children.

Stoicism, as a universal school of thought, embraces nature as an all-men moral guidance. All men are part of nature and share a global naturalistic ethics. We take this exploration beyond the realities of the dying ghetto into previous chapters of Korczak's life and explore the hypothesis that behind Korczak's understanding of children, education, and the practices he had implemented in his children's houses, stands a cosmological worldview, inspired by Stoic ideas, including "Nature" as the missing bond of Korczak ideas and pedagogical practices.

## **Stoicism**

What is Stoicism? Stoicism as a universal worldview, originated in the third century BC, at the down of classical Greece, in the Stoa (columned walkways) around the city square of Athens, the agora, to develop in later centuries as a dominant philosophical school in the Greco-Roman world (Rist, 1969; Sandbach, 1975).

Stoicism does not offer one paved road; it is rather a direction of thought and a state of mind. It contains different interpretations to the radical changes that the Greek world went through after the conquests of Alexander the Great and the collapse of its local city-state structure. Before Alexander wiped away the political horizons of the Hellenic world, one understood himself as a citizen of a certain city-state – he was an Athenian or Corinthian and all that it entailed. The Polis gave its citizens an identity. Now, the borders of the "civilized" world were broadened beyond the horizons, and people needed a new orientation. Stoicism offered a new orientation to the life of the individual in a globalized world. Nature was offered as an ordering principle that can bring all human beings together and guides the individual in his life in an age of globalization.

As a school, Stoicism got many variations, but if one summarizes the Stoic teaching of several hundred years, one can derive the following matrix of ideas: nature is infinite and there is nothing beyond it. The Divine logos penetrates Nature and makes it rational. All human beings are part of nature, and the rational law of Nature should guide them to their happiness. The consequence of the Stoic paradigm is the Stoic Apathea, the indifference to the hardships of life, including death. In contrast to monotheistic theology, Stoicism offers a holistic worldview, which does not transcend God, nor the human being from nature. , but rather explains it as part of the worldly reality. Stoicism understands God as identical with nature or as its immanent spirit. Man

is part of nature.

The Stoic ethical imperative is to live according to the postulates of nature. Apathea, the Stoic indifference, is the result of human understanding that no one can exclude himself from the order of the world, and especially from death. A rational person has to learn this order and live accordingly. Nonetheless, the understanding of human mortality poses a moral duty. The verdict of mortality should not promote the feeling of passivity and indifference, but rather the idea that in every day of their short life men has a moral responsibility for the world: “*Not as though thou hadst thousands of years to live. Death hangs over thee: whilst yet thou livest, whilst thou mayest, be good.*” (Marcus Aurelius, [2011], *Meditations*, book 4, XIV, p. 51). Stoicism has at its basis a moral pathos, calling men to moral commitment – Pietas – to the improvement of reality (Nussbaum, 2004, 499-501). How to hold together both Apathea and Pietas, a deterministic worldview and moral action – this the major Stoic philosophy’s predicament.

From Greece Stoicism found its way to other parts of the Greco-Roman world and as a worldwide spiritual and political movement, it existed successively for 500 years. Marcus Aurelius (121 – 180 AD, Roman Emperor, 161-180 AD) was the latest identified Greco-Roman stoic thinker. As the emperor of Rome, he served most of his ruling years with his armies, defending the northern borders of the empire. There and then he wrote his known book ‘*Meditations*’ as a source of his own guidance for self-improvement and strengthening, expressing his understanding of Stoic teaching (Marcus Aurelius, 1997).

Stoicism continued its existence, even after the collapse of the Roman world. Stoic ideas influenced the thought of the Fathers of the Christian Church. In Medieval times, the Stoic thinking was present mostly in the undercurrents of European culture, emerging to the surface again in the Renaissance period and the Enlightenment, contributing to the secularization and modernization of European culture (Lovejoy, 1961; Oestreich, 1982; Shner, 1989). The Stoic emphasis on Nature as the guiding principle of rational life suited the spirit of the New Age natural sciences.

The stoic immanent logos became in modernity the immanent laws of nature. Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* became a favorite book of several noted personalities of modern times, including Frederick the Great, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold and Goethe (Hays, 2003, XLIX). As such, it could also be available to a modern European intellectual like Korczak.

Like in other eras of globalization in human history, Janusz Korczak, the assimilated Jew, and the Polish doubted patriot, was in a need for a new orientation. The non-totally Polish person and the non-totally Jewish person sought for a new orientation and recognition in a universal worldview: one nature, one humanity, and one rational education (July 18, 1942, *Ghetto Years*, 196).

### **Nature is the context of all beings**

The basic line of the Stoic paradigm is the infinity of nature, both in space and in time.\*\* Nature, instead of the Monotheistic God, got a regulative role in human life. The human being is part of this infinite nature; it gives the human being, his or her life orientation, his or her ethics and the road to fulfilling life and happiness.

To understand oneself and to know one's destiny – *to know thyself* in the words of Socrates and Stoicism – is to explore his or her place in the infinity of nature. Being part of nature has also an ethical implication. Human life is regulated not by a transcendental source like in monotheistic traditions, but by the immanent logic of nature. The Stoic Logos, which permeates nature, or its later equivalent in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spinoza's "Laws of Nature", is dictating to men the rational way of life that may lead to happiness or redemption.\*\*\*

The idea of infinity sets the seriousness of education in Korczak's eyes. Pedagogy means touching the other and touching the other means encountering the infinite. The infinity of the reality of men means that learning the other is an infinite mission. In a religious language, the educational encounter has a religious meaning, touching the Divine spirit of this world.

Various texts in Korczak's writings elude the idea of infinity and eternity. Korczak, a well-known pediatrician, received questions of all sorts about education and parenting. Young mothers come to Korczak with their questions about motherhood and the health of their child and Korczak recalls his answers in his main pedagogical book, "How to love a Child" (1919):

"My baby."

No, it is not yours, not even during the months of pregnancy or in

---

\*\* In Hebrew Eternity and spatial Infinity are referred to in one word „Ein Sof". Infinite reality is also eternal.

\*\*\* A discussion of the tradition of immanence and its ethical meaning see: Yovel, 1988; Curley, 1973.



the hour of childbirth.

The child you have delivered weighs ten pounds. There is eight pounds of water and a handful of carbon, calcium, nitrogen, sulfur, phosphorus, and iron. You have given birth to eight pounds of water and two pounds of ash. And drop-by-drop what goes to make your child has been clouded vapor, snow crystal, mist, dew, the mountain spring and the scum of a city gutter. Every atom of carbon or nitrogen has been bound into millions of different combinations. You yourself have taken only that which has to be gotten.

Earth suspended in infinity. Its close companion – the sun – fifty million miles away. The diameter of this minute globe of ours is just three thousand miles of fire with a thin, ten-mile deep, cool crust. Spattered upon that thin crust stuffed with fire amidst the oceans, there is land. Upon land, amidst trees and bushes, insects, birds and animals, men swarms like ants.

Among these millions of men, you have brought forth one more – is it not so? – Something infinitely minute, a speck of dust – a nothing. It is so fragile that it may be destroyed by any bacteria which, even when magnified a thousand times is but a dot in the field of the view.

But that “nothing” is the brother, the flesh, and blood, of every sea wave, of the wind and the thunderbolt, of the sun and the Milky Way. That speck of grass, of every oak and palm – of every chick, lion cub, colt, and pup.

There is something within it that feels and scrutinizes – suffers, desires and rejoices, loves, trusts and hates – believes, doubts, draws close and turns away. That speck embraces in thought everything: the stars and oceans, mountains and abysses. And what is the substance of its soul if not the universe, though dimensionless? Here is the contradiction in the human being, rose from the dust, which God has made his dwelling.

You say, "My baby." It is not. The child is a common property; he belongs to the mother and father, the grandfathers and grandmothers [...] Child and infinity. Child and eternity. Child – an instant in time. (Korczak, "How to Love Children", 1919, Korczak, 1967, 1967, 84-88)

Korczak offers parents and educators a wider perspective of their children. He suggests that they should understand the child in a cosmic perspective and in the context of the infinity of time.

Saying that the baby "is not yours", Korczak does not deny the mother her motherhood. No one is closer to the baby than his or her mother is. He wants to stress, that the Child is not an isolated individual that suddenly appeared in the world. The baby, like all natural creatures, is an integral part of the infinite nature, which God is its soul, and infinite time. The child bears the genetics of his or her immediate parents, but in a hidden text, he or she carries within him or her the footprints of a long history of ancestors. The human being is not coming to this world *ex nihilo*, but as a continuation of an infinite reality.

In order to understand the child, the educator has to learn the child's life in its broadest sense, his or her family, social life, culture, health, biography, and the history of his or her community. Understanding a person in the context of his or her holistic reality carries crucial pedagogical implications. Education is not a limited, isolated work in the classroom or in the orphanage halls, but rather an infinite adventure of reaching out to the infinity of reality. To meet a child is to grasp the infinity of nature embodied in his or her existence, to touch the hidden soul of the world and the chain of generations that echoes in him or her. Nonetheless, the individual is not a mystery or an open possibility like in modern existentialism – his or her nature is open to a rational study. The scientist explores the essence of nature – the educator explores the reality of the child.

Korczak appears as an essentialist – every individual has his or her own reality, past, family roots, genetics, which determines much of the individual behavior. Natural science is an open adventure – natural pedagogy is an open adventure as well. The nature of the individual is a text we read repeatedly and never reach its full understanding. The grand questions of education are located within this category of thought – it can never be answered in full as it touches the infinity of life.

We gain our knowledge about children and education from our life experience, observation of children, metacognition and reflection. Like in the world of Greek philosophy, and like in natural science, the main avenue of understanding is an observation and a methodological collection of data. As a critical empiricist, Korczak advocates rational and meticulous clinical observation of the child and the children's social life. He measures his children weekly, weighs them, and keep a close account of the physical and mental condition of each one of them. He keeps scientific diagrams in his notebooks. Education should start with a diagnosis of reality, the nature of the child and it appears to be an infinite task.

### **I do not know**

Facing the many questions of young mothers, seeking professional prescriptions for raising their children, Korczak expresses in his "How to Love a Child", the principal refusal of such requests:

How, when, how much — why? I am presentient of many questions awaiting answers, of doubts seeking an explanation. And my answer is, "I do not know." Each time you put aside a book to spin the thread of your own thoughts, it means that the book has served its purpose. Whenever you skim over the pages, seeking rules and ready prescriptions, frowning at their paucity — you should know that if you do find counsels and indications, that this has happened not only despite but even against the writer's will. (Korczak 1967: 93)

The negative approach to pedagogical books and elaborate prescriptions is based on the philosophical understanding of the infinity of the human being within an infinite context of nature. The idea of infinity dictates an intellectual modesty, which permeates his entire pedagogical worldview.

I do not know, and cannot possibly tell, how parents unknown to me can rear a child likewise unknown to me, under conditions unknown to me; I repeat — can rear, not wish to or should rear. "I do not know" — is in the realm of science like an emerging nebula, a nebula of looming new ideas, ever nearer the truth. "I don't know" is to a mind untrained to scientific thinking a tormenting nothing-

ness. I should like to teach others how to understand and love that wonderful effervescent creative “I don’t know” as regards contemporary knowledge of the child replete with dazzling surprises.

Let me emphasize that no book, no physician, can replace one’s own keen thought, own attentive perception. (Korczak 1967: 93)

Korczak adopts the Socratic stand towards knowledge: “I do not know”. The classic “I do not know” reappear in various places in his writings as his principle understanding of knowledge. The wise person stands before the infinity of reality and recognizes the principal limitation of his or her knowledge, which will never encompass the whole reality of nature. The Knowledge of the child, like the knowledge of nature in science, is an endless mission.

Any attempts to provide parents and teachers with a professional scheme of proper education are doomed to fail. No book and no pedagogical theory can contain all the answers to all the questions that life will put in front of the educator.

I fear that the reader may be willing to believe me. Then the book will harm him. Therefore, I give a warning: the road that I have chosen toward my goal is neither the shortest nor the most convenient, but it is the best for me — because it is mine — my own. I found it not without effort, not without pain, and only when I had come to understand that all the books read and the experience and opinions of others — were misleading. (Korczak 1967: 200)

In Korczak’s view, education is not a profession based on a known corpus of professional knowledge. It is rather the brave attempt to engage the infinity of human reality with an open mind and sensitive heart.

### **Nature guided Pedagogy**

The idea that nature is the only context of life, and that there is no transcendence, finds its place also in the practicalities of education and childcare.

Young Korczak belonged to a layer of Polish intellectuals and social activists who struggled with the social problems of modern society and with the reality of poverty in the modern industrial age city. In his *Ghetto Diary*, which he wrote in 1942 in the Warsaw Jewish ghetto, Korczak tells us that social problems and poverty bothered him already when he was a very young child, suggesting that the abolition of money

will solve the problem of poverty (Ghetto Years, 110-111). However, his social activism started to take shape during his university medical studies, and especially in his participation in the meetings of the underground “Flying University”.

Together with his friend, the poet Ludwik Stanisław Liciński, he explored the margins of the city society and learned about the hidden parts of modern city life, the gutters, the brothels, the reality of children in the street of Warsaw (Lifton, 1988).

Korczak had started his lifelong work with children with inner-city children. His first book is *Children of the Street (Dzieci Ulicy)*, Warsaw 1901), in which he dealt with the hardships of their life. A life of poverty in childhood years has its mark on the development of the individual. In 1905-1912, after he finished his medical studies, he worked as a pediatrician at the Baumans and Bersons Children Hospital, and there he witnessed the ill results of poverty. There and then, he developed his social awareness and started to dedicate his time and energies to the cause of children.

A major aspect of the industrial era poverty is the detachment of people from nature. Narrow streets, dense houses, malnutrition, lack of medical care, street violence, long work hours of the parents, lack of playing grounds for children, restricted access to public parks or countryside resorts – shaped the world of the inner-city children. As an essentialist, Korczak put a lot of weight on these conditions of the child’s life, as these are the factors, which determine the child’s course of life.

Korczak represented in his professional identity a rare combination of a physicist and an educator. The physicist Korczak brings into the picture the scientific thinking of natural science. As a social scientist, Korczak recommends a diagnostic thinking. The first step in proper education is the diagnosis of the child, understanding all the aspects of his or her reality. Influenced by Jan Wladyslaw Dawid, Poland’s first experimental psychologist, who he met at the “Flying University” meetings, he puts much importance on a positivist study of people. Later on, he has developed his ritualistic routines in his children’s houses, measuring the children weekly, looking for any hint of health problems, carefully recording the results in scientific charts and keeping them in his notebooks. He invested much of his time in the observation of his children in all moments of their life, eating, playing, working, and sleeping and writing down the findings in his records.

As an educator, a father to children, he tried to help wherever he could, but always admitted that his ability to change reality is limited. Korczak’s pedagogy is a reality-guided pedagogy. Education, he claimed, is not about what we want the child

to be, but about what the child is and can become.

Be true to yourself. Seek your own road. Learn to know yourself before you attempt to learn to know the children.

[...] You yourself are the child whom you must learn to know, rear, and above all, enlighten.

There are no children, just people, but with a different conceptual scale, different ranges of experience, different urges, different emotional reactions. Remember that we do not know them.

[...] Be yourself and watch children carefully whenever they can be what they really are. Look, and make no demands. For you will not force a lively, impulsive child to become cool, calm and collected. The distrustful and taciturn will not turn frank and talkative. [...]

And what about yourself? [...] You have a kind smile and a patient look. Just say nothing. Perhaps they will quiet down anyway. They are seeking their own way. Do not demand of yourself that you become right away an earnest, full-fledged educator with psychological bookkeeping in your heart and an educational code in your head. You have a wonderful ally, a magician – youth [...]. Not – what ought to be, but – what is possible. (Korczak, 1967, 248-249)

The nature of the child, determined by the circumstances and conditions of his or her life, should direct education. Korczak did not accept the American-like, capitalist idea that „the sky is the limit” to one’s achievements. The realities of life quite often set the limits. In the C.V., which he submitted in 1942 to the Warsaw Ghetto Jewish council, he represents himself, among other characteristics as an expert in Eugenics (Korczak, 1980, 230). Eugenics, a discipline that became infamous after the Nazi era, was in those days a respectable theory that claimed that much of one’s character is determined by his or her physical nature and heredity.

## Education and Nature

Nature is the ultimate context of life and nature is a resource of life. The poor are deprived the wealth of nature, which members of the high society get.

The great Saxon Park (Ogrod Saski) in the center of the city, beautiful then as never since, with the Mineral Springs Institute—but not beautiful for all; the poorly clad are forbidden entry. There are no cinemas, but there are theaters with top-ranking companies, talented actors. First-rate restaurants, numerous coffee rooms. A good circus and a racecourse; sport scarcely exist yet, is but in the introductory stage among enlightened and well-to-do circles the Rowing Club, the Cycling Club, led by Count August Potocki. (Newerly, in Korczak, Korczak 1967: 15)

Korczak, the social activist, sees this reality. In previous centuries, the parks were open only to the nobles, now in the wake of the twentieth-century it open to the rich. The poor do not enjoy the richness that the city has to offer, nor the beauty of the countryside.

In his second book, *Child of the Drawing Room (Dziecko Salonu, 1906)*, Korczak refers to the child of the middle class. It corresponds also to his early childhood experience. The child is overprotected, kept at home, and deprived the joy of free life and the healing factor of nature. In his, *How to Love a Child*, which already contains his elaborate pedagogy, in the section dealing with „The Child in the family” he writes:

Much has changed. There is not only the white enamel paint on the furniture, but also the beach, excursions, sports and the scout movement. There is a little more liberty, but the child’s life is still dull and constrained. (Korczak, 1967, 125)

Without the joy of nature the child’s life, even from well-to-do families, is restrained, dull and anemic.

Criticizing the bourgeois childcare and the established school Korczak is advocating freedom of life, hands-on experience,

[...] If the nursery is, contrary to the rules, so often turned into a workshop full of junk — that is, the material needed for the intended construction — is that not the place to which we should direct

our research? The linoleum in a small child's room. Would not a large heap of lovely yellow sand, a sizeable bunch of sticks and a barrelful of stone be better? Perhaps a plank, cardboard, a pound of nails, a saw, a hammer and a lathe would be a more welcomed gift than „a game.” An instructor in handicrafts would be more to the point than a master in gymnastics and piano playing. First, we should have to exorcise hospital silence from the nursery, hospital cleanliness, and the fear of a scratch on the finger.

Sensible parents are hurt when their order to „play” is met with the answer: „All the time play, nothing but play?” What next, if their resources are exhausted.

Much has changed. Sports and games are not merely tolerated, but have been included in school curricula. Louder and louder is the clamor for playing fields. With the hour-by-hour changes the average father of a family, the average educationalist cannot keep pace. (Korczak, 1967, 160)

The bourgeois school cannot contain the energies and the imagination of the child. At his coming of age diary, a *Butterfly's Confession* (1914).

Dealing with the fate of poor inner-city children, as well as with the life of bourgeois Children, Korczak started very early in his pedagogical career, in 1904, to go as children's counselor to summer camps. The idea of taking poor inner-city children to summer camps had originated already in the second half of the Nineteenth-century in Switzerland and then inspired a „summer camps movement” in Poland. Dr. Stanislaw Markiewicz, a known physician and a social activist, founded in Warsaw a philanthropic organization (TKL), which took upon himself the task of sending poor and unhealthy inner-city children to the countryside. Korczak was a member of this organization from as early as 1900 and it was this philanthropic organization, which hired the medical student to accompany the children in the camps (Ciesielska, M. „History of the Stories”, 1998).

These summer camps were Korczak's first pedagogical laboratories, where he articulated his main pedagogical insights. There he also learned the strict diagnostics of the physical and mental conditions of the children, which he then implemented in his own orphanages summer camps. Following his summers in the camps, he published two children's storybooks, *Moski, Joski I Srule* (1909-1910) and *Jozki, Jaski*



*I Franki* (1909-1910, 1911)) and various articles in which he reflects on the pedagogical experience of these summer camps.

In his 1919 book, he can already summarize his experience:

[...] Summer vacation camps for poor children. The sun, trees and a river; they imbibe the joy of life, refinement, and goodness. Yesterday still a little cave dweller, today — a good sport. Abashed, fearful and solemn, a week later — bold, lively, bursting, with initiative and song. Sometimes a visible change from hour to hour, sometimes — from week to week, occasionally — no change at all. Nothing miraculous, no lack of the miraculous — just what is and has been, and has waited; and what has not been there, is not there! (Korczak 1967: 135-136)

Korczak sees the healing process of being in nature. Being free in nature enables the evolution of the child from a primitive life condition to a healthy creative persona. Yet, even a wonderful summer experience cannot change the basic reality of the child, „*what has not been there — isn't there*”.

When Korczak had his own orphanages, he used to take his children to summer camps as well. After moving the camps every summer from one place to another, the orphanage got a donation in 1921 and established the „Rozyczka” farm in Goclawek, where every summer the children from both of Korczak's children's houses were used to spend time together. The last summer camp there was in the summer of 1940 just weeks before the orphanage forced into the Jewish ghetto.

Gender was a sensitive issue Korczak was involved in, from his days in the „Flying University”. How to make the girl equal to boys? Promoting outdoors activities and sports raised the challenge of girls' participation, and in „How to Love a Child”, he writes:

[...] Until we set the girls free, „it's not proper” — the root of it is their manner of dressing — all efforts to make them the company for boys will be in vain. [...] Short skirts; bathing suits and sports dresses; new dances — a bold attempt at solving the problem upon new principles. How much deliberation lies behind fashion creations? I trust there is no thoughtlessness. Away with peevishness and criticalness, in discussing the so-called touchy subjects, we hold on to cautious prejudices. (Korczak 1967: 181)

The same attitude we can find later on in his known novel *King Matt the First* (1924), in the strong and charismatic character of the African princess Klu Klu. There, she is the free minded and courageous persona in the children's parliament. Already in the Twenties of the previous century, Korczak has denied the idea that girls are inferior by nature to boys. It is just a tradition that determines the way girls are treated.

The sports were part of the emerging modern education and Korczak appreciates it. In 1928, he spent several months in Paris, and he writes that once he attended a water sports meeting. There, what occupied him was the observation of the various types of children. (Korczak, 1967, 401) Other sports activities gave the opportunity to learn the children, why some participate in sports happily while others refuse. (Korczak, 1967, 57). Sometimes, the sport was of no good for an ill person, but the person refused to give it up. Sports activities were for Korczak opportunities to learn the different personalities of his children. Sports were an opportunity for a diagnosis of people. „*The trained eye of the keen observer will pick out the quiet, meek, colorless and unappreciated children*”. (Korczak, 1967, 410)

The four weeks stay at the summer camp, were intended to be an educational super-time, filling up the resources of the children. Korczak writes „*I wanted to make the four-week stay at the camp a „ribbon of bliss and happiness”, without a single tear, for the children from „basements and attics*” (Korczak, 1967, 262)

The summer camp was a land of freedom. No set curriculum, just what the children and their educators want. The openness of schedule is what makes the camp an ultimate pedagogical laboratory, an opportunity to learn the nature and personality of every child. Much weight is put in Korczak thought on social conditions as the child's behavior determinants. Here, in the freedom of nature, the child could be who he or she truly is. The summer camp was also an opportunity for different social life and children's identity was revealed in the way they managed their social life. Korczak was observing the children and was taking notes in his notebook.

On the different conditions in the city and in the summer camp that make children happier, free and authentic, he writes:

It would be risky to claim that children of the poor are more moral than those of the rich. There are alarming observations on record on both sides, One thing seems clear to me. Observations are made in the cages of city apartments where lack of space, prohibition of noise and running about, boredom and idleness, compel children to

seek strong impressions and sensations, which will not, however, disturb the peace of the surroundings.

On the basis of observation of children at summer camps, I declare that a normal child always prefers playing with a ball, racing, bathing, climbing trees to retiring secretly into a quiet corner to dream of who knows what.

Boys and girls can be safely left to run about in the woods with minimum supervision since gathering berries and mushrooms will so absorb them that more likely than amorous manifestations are a fight over a mushroom or a „robbery” by the stronger. (Korczak 1967: 287)

The child in the camp can be energetic and playful. They can be left with much less supervision to be who they are by nature, in nature. Here, we see the implementation of the Korczak statement that children have the right to a full life and the right to die, strange as it may sound. The right to die is the right to take risks in life and to live in freedom as much as one can. If a child knows to swim well, one may let him swim on his own. (Korczak, 1967, 288).

The summer camp was the best opportunity to bring inner-city children to nature, but besides its educational importance, the summer camp was for Korczak the ultimate educational laboratory. There he developed his understanding of children and his pedagogical ideas. In his *How to Love a Child*, at the opening of „The Summer Camp” section, Korczak writes: „*I owe a lot to summer camps. There for the first time, I came in touch with a child community and, in independent work; I learned the alphabet of educational practice.*” (Korczak, 1967, 262) There, Korczak articulated his ideas about education and from there he took these ideas to the children’s societies in his two orphanages.

## Conclusion

Many associate Korczak with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His King Matt is sometimes called „Korczak’s Emile”. Yet, Korczak refuses to idealize the child. He is realistic about the child, his world, and his or her ability to grow and change. Nature is the determining factor in his humanistic education philosophy.

Nature is the cosmic ordering principle of his whole philosophy. It brings to-

gether his ideas and his pedagogical practices into a holistic worldview. The child, like any human being, is part of nature, and should be understood as such.

Korczak appears as a naturalist philosopher. We understand that his pedagogy depends not on spiritual aspirations, but on the ground of facts. The reality of the child should guide the educator. One understands reality through a clinical observation.

Nature is also the reality, which the children of poverty are denied. Nature has a healing power on children, and therefore he joins the philanthropic organization that offers inner-city children's summer camping.

The reality of life in nature happened to be Korczak's main educational laboratory where he reached most of his pedagogical insights.

When he could, Korczak offered his own children's communities the opportunity to go out to the countryside. From 1921, he got Ruzicka farm, which was the place of his summer camps until the summer of 1940. There, in nature, Korczak achieved many of his educational goals to provide children with a happy and healthy life experience.

Understanding the human being as part of nature is not compatible with the common „landscape” of postmodernism. Twenty-Century philosophy celebrated the idea of human subjectivity, and elevated the human being beyond nature, granting the individual an ultimate freedom. Existentialism was the dominant trend in the Twentieth-Century philosophy. Buber's I-Thou was a best seller among young Europeans who searched for meaning in an industrial mass society. The person was a free spirit, the product of a genuine dialogue. Heidegger's „Dasein” gave the individual's a-priori existence (Being and Time, 1962, 78-90 [Sein und Zeit, 1927]). The individual is there, in the world, before any ontological or ethical claim. Everything we say about Man is an interpretation to this situation of his „throwness” or „being in the world”, which is open to all possibilities of being.

In contrast to this philosophical atmosphere, Korczak discusses the nature of Man and explains humanity in the context of nature. If in existential perspective Man creates his world, then in Korczak's philosophy the world creates the human being. Korczak is not an existentialist, but rather an essentialist, and his pedagogy is an immanent or naturalistic pedagogy. It is not education, which creates reality, but it is a reality, which directs the proper education.

## REFERENCES

- Ciesielska, Marta. 1998. "History of the Stories." Pp. 289-312 in Korczak, Writings Vol. 3: Summer Camps Stories. Tel Aviv: The Ghetto Fighters House, Israeli Korczak Association, Yad Vashem.
- Cohen, Adir. 1995. *The Gate of Light: Janusz Korczak, the Educator and Writer Who Overcame the Holocaust*. Vancouver, BC: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Curley, Edwin M. 1973. "Spinoza's Moral Philosophy." in Marjorie Grene (Ed.). *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hays, Gregory. 2003. "Introduction." in Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Korczak, Janusz. 1980. *The Ghetto Years*. Tel Aviv: The Ghetto Fighters House and Hakibbutz Hameuchad.
- Korczak, Janusz. 1967. *Selected Works*. Warsaw: The Scientific Publications Foreign Cooperation Center of the Central Institute for Scientific, Technical and Economic Information.
- Lifton, Betty Jean. 1988. *The king of children: a biography of Janusz Korczak*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Lovejoy, Arthur Oncken. 1961. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Marcus Aurelius. 1997. *Meditations*. Dover Publications.
- Marcus Aurelius. 2011. *Meditations*. The Floating Press. EBSCO online edition.
- Newerly, Igor. 1967. "Introduction." Pp. 12-27 in J. Korczak. *Selected Works*. Warsaw: The Scientific Publications Foreign Cooperation Center of the Central Institute for Scientific, Technical and Economic Information.
- Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 2004. *The Therapy of Desire – Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Oestreich, Gerhard. 1982. *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rist, John Michael. 1969. *Stoic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sandbach, Francis Henry. 1975. *The Stoics*. London: Chatto & Windus.

- Perlis, Yitzhak. 1986. *Ish Yehudi MePolin*. Tel Aviv: The Ghetto Fighters House and Hakibbutz HaMeuchad. (Hebrew)
- Shner, Moshe. 1912. *Janusz Korczak and Itzhak Katzenelson: two Educators in the Abysses of History*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University and Mofet Institute. (Hebrew)
- Shner, Moshe. 1989. *Stoic Elements of Spinoza's pantheistic Philosophy*. (Master Thesis). Haifa: Haifa University. (Hebrew)
- Silverman, Marc. 2012. *The Child is a Person: Janusz Korczak educational Thought*. Tel Aviv: Mofet Institute. (Hebrew)
- Yovel, Yirmiyahu. 1988. *Spinoza and Other Heretics*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz HaMeuchad.

